

Fiction merged with documentary and the film was permeated by that urgency of capturing what was happening, by the feeling that all was fleeting, like youth, or hope, or the construction of the subway, which was heading for completion and had to be caught on film then or never. Cinema and the moment, Carla Bolito's face, her life, the way the character was portrayed, it all converges to that moment of the shooting and that moment of the city and of the country, the moment of light, the moment in which we are all alive. Life as conflict, as tension, as crisis.

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lost in translation — reality as fake, image as reality

by Francisco Ferreira

That is the story of the city. The city is no longer. We can leave the theatre now...¹

When Charlotte, Sofia Coppola's character in *Lost in Translation*², looks over the densely lit urban landscape from her Park Hyatt Tokyo Hotel room window, it is as if her own existence is being questioned by the gestaltian presence of the cityscape that she is confronted with. The shifting focus of the camera lens between figure and ground – a movement Coppola often uses along the film – further intensifies the idea of that confrontation, thus establishing the detached condition of the character from her spatial and, more radically, her existential self-awareness.



Lost in Translation, Sofia Coppola
(Focus Features, 2003)



Tokyo-Ga, Wim Wenders
(Chris Sievernik Filmproduktion, 1985)



Throughout the film, Charlotte is set adrift on the streets of Tokyo, the camera accompanying her in a way as to also determine the resulting images as subjective impressions of a foreign perception of the reality at hand. A reality turned into signs that, for the most part, become untranslatable, a circumstance that brings out the fact that the character is not *lost* because she cannot identify herself with Japanese culture, but rather because the contemporary construction of one's identity becomes more and more enthralled by the simultaneously convoluted and fragmented condition of time and space. And although the character is framed within situations, spaces or rituals that call for her attention — moments that might imply a natural effort of *understanding* — at some point she acknowledges that she *doesn't feel anything*. Charlotte's naiveté towards what unfolds around her thus establishes a discomfort that paradoxically seduces those following her movements, as if one, as Charlotte, is looking at things, at the city, for the first time...no memories, no knowledge, just the fuzzy indifference of an image waiting to be revealed.

Contrary to Charlotte, Herzog knows exactly what the problem is, he knows that when he complains about the lack of clarity in images, he is actually regretting the evolving erosion of contrasts, be it aesthetic, cultural, technological or natural.

In Wim Wenders's *Tokyo-Ga*³, an equally disenchanted Werner Herzog complains about the lack of clarity in contemporary images, blaming the overly saturated metropolitan landscape for it, and stating that it makes it impossible to find images that may *be with us in civilisation, that may be consistent in our inner self and in our most profound deepness*. Apparently, for Herzog, the contemporary and dense metropolis of the late 20th century is not capable of producing a clear, *transparent* image, one that may be identified, classified, or acknowledged as *real*. Clearly, Herzog feels something, when looking at Tokyo's skyline, just not what he wishes he would like to feel. Contrary to Charlotte, Herzog knows exactly what the problem is, he knows that when he complains about the lack of clarity in images, he is actually regretting the evolving erosion of contrasts, be it aesthetic, cultural, technological or natural contrasts. But mainly he understands that if the images that contemporary space and time are able to produce are ambiguous, it is because reality itself — which translates and is revealed through such images — is now a *reality without history*. It became — paraphrasing Rem Koolhaas in *The Generic City* — *superficial, equally exciting — or unexciting — everywhere*.⁴ But Wenders, as we know, although acknowledging Herzog's concerns, ends the sequence by stating that in fact, the images that he is interested in could only be found down below, *in the chaos of the city*. For he is still able to be fascinated, and it is within this almost childlike fascination that he uses a considerable part of the film to record the making of three-dimensional artificial food *images*, to be either photographed and put into restaurant menus or simply on display on restaurant windows. To watch, silently, the process of preparation of those food icons — a process that starts with real

¹ Rem Koolhaas, *The Generic City*, in *S, M, L, XL*, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995, p. 1264

² *Lost in Translation*, written and directed by Sofia Coppola, produced by Focus Features, Toho Kashinsha Film Company Ltd, American Zoetrope, Elemental Films, 101 mins., USA / Japan, 2003

³ *Tokyo-Ga*, written and directed by Wim Wenders, produced by Chris Sievernich Filmproduktion, Gray City, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Wim Wenders Productions, Wim Wenders Stiftung, 92 mins., USA / West Germany, 1985

⁴ Rem Koolhaas, op. Cit., p. 1250

food and sometimes resembles the actual preparation of real food — induces a similar sensation to the one one might feel on the analogue developing of film, concluding the photographic process with the revelation of the image as a *real thing*. And so, one can only assume, the fascination towards the idea of *reality* being revealed through images carries the same substance that may trick us into thinking about the *image* as merely an act of reproduction.

It is said that Nicéphore Niépce began experimenting with lithographic printmaking because of his inability to draft images by hand. Following this possibility, one may infer that the world's first known photographs came into existence as a means of substituting a man made, *erroneous* representation of reality, by a process that would or could *correctly* depict it. Replacing eye, hand, brain and human ability — or lack thereof — for camera obscura, pewter plates and chemical compounds, thus reinforced the process of *mimesis* that the Renaissance had set in motion, a process which would then prompt the broader issues of *truthfulness* or *factual depiction* as qualities of the photographic image in relation to the reality it focuses upon. As André Bazin put it, *the camera obscura of Da Vinci foreshadowed the camera of Niépce*.⁵

Jean-Luc Godard's dictum in the film *Le Petit Soldat*⁶, that photography is truth and that therefore *cinema is 24 times the truth per second*, also establishes, within the context of the scene in which it is said — one in which the character played by Anna Karina is sensing that being photographed is like being questioned by the police —, that photographic images resemble an enquiry that depicts a factual revelation from within the *object* they are capturing. Godard's statement, and the cultural environment it was made in, thus comes to acknowledge Bazin's own statement that *Photography enjoys a certain advantage* — over other forms of art, especially painting or drawing — *in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction*.⁷ If, for a while, we allow ourselves to follow Bazin's reasoning, we could then determine that, within the photographic medium, the reproduced image of a certain subject — be it a landscape, a person or a mere object — incorporates the aura of authenticity of said subject. In this sense, the image aims at becoming the thing it portrays through the capturing of its identity. Bazin's argument is founded on the assertion that the reality of the photographic image is attainable through the impassive quality of the lens, which strips away all those *ways of seeing it* — its real subject — *those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it*.⁸ This idea leads to believe that the camera lens enables an *objective* contact with the world, a mediated contact that eludes subjectivity in favour of what Ignasi de Solà-Morales called *an exterior construction* of reality's actual appearance.⁹ The truth, then, becomes a carefully and *objective* constructed reproduction of the real, to be attained through the artificial-

⁵ André Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, N. 4 (Summer 1960), p. 6.

⁶ *Le Petit Soldat*, written and directed by Jean-Luc Godard, produced by Les Productions Georges de Beauregard, Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie (SNC), 88 mins., France, 1963.

⁷ André Bazin, op. Cit., p. 8.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, *Mediaciones en la Arquitectura y en el Passage Urbano*, in *Territorios*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, SA, Barcelona, 2002, p. 114.



Tokyo-Ga, Wim Wenders
(Chris Sievernik Filmproduktion, 1985)



ity of a technological process. For Solà-Morales, this allows, on the one hand, for a *concretion of our visual field*, and on the other hand, for the *multiplying of its possibilities*.¹⁰ Through the technological process of the camera and of the lens, through the selective process of framing, the condition within which reality is understood also becomes paradoxically expanded, fragmented. If realistic painting established the idea of a portrait of reality, a subjective capture of a state of mind in an experimental confrontation with such reality, photography began as almost an ideal, one that would turn our perception of things into a constructive action, not just a representational one after all. It is in this sense, I believe, that André Bazin also considers that photography *actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing for a substitute of it*.¹¹ Photography thus adds to reality, enhances it, rearranges it, reimagines it, embodies it in a way in which it becomes an artificial and heterogeneous creation, not an *a priori* state of things for one to look upon and to attempt to reproduce. Through photography — also through film —, through the mediation of the artificial lens and *camera obscura*, reality ceases to be an object and becomes a subject that is an appearance that reveals itself as a dispersed field of spaces, events and temporalities. An appearance that should be understood as its actual substance.

Reality as a *world of images*, then, implies that *there is not a unique image* — as Ignasi de Solà-Morales puts it —, *but only approximations, segments of a discontinuous appropriation. Each photographic image is, at the same time, an insufficient account of reality but a real account*.¹² Each frame of a film then becomes, following Godard's statement, a piece of sublimated reality, composing — due to the effect of sequentality and montage — a rather complex image through the depiction of movement. As an instrument of modernity, photographic and cinematic images determined a new path within the process of dealing and reasoning with reality, by changing the instrumental-

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

¹¹ André Bazin, op. Cit., p. 8.

¹² Ignasi de Solà-Morales, op. Cit. p. 119.



White Diagonal with Four People,
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1940-44



View from the Radio Tower,
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy,
Berlin, 1928

ity of the arts from a causal relation between observation and reproduction into an act of observation as manipulation. This kind of manipulation, attained through the mechanical process of photographic devices — involving a camera or not —, leads to what Solà-Morales calls a *fiction of world*¹³, one that is not interested in any sort of description of what is real but is directly implied into its becoming. In fact, both in Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's photographs and photograms and in Dziga Vertov's film *Man with the Movie Camera*¹⁴, reality appears as artifice, a manipulation of space, time and matter, in which said reality eventually comes to depend more on the process through which it is being observed and composed, than on the real elements that are contributing to its creation as image. On the other hand, the making of images through the process of multi-exposure — in which a cubist sense is brought to urban landscapes, as if the dynamics of the metropolis would somehow influence its own *real* image, as made by Moholy-Nagy —, or the convoluted sequences and juxtapositions of different situations, points of view, scales or types of movement within Vertov's film montage, also contribute to a better definition of the cultural and visual landscape from which modernity, as both a methodology and an event, was erupting. This led to the sense that, within the hype of early modern reality, one was in control of events, matter and landscape, as if reality was indeed a kind of fluid studio set with which the photographer, as well as the filmmaker, would constantly interfere with and, consequently, transform and determine. It is not by chance, then, that *Man with a Movie Camera* depicts life in the city along with the documenting or staging of its capture by the *man with the movie camera*. Nevertheless, before the opening shot, the film actually presents its medium and intentions, stating, amongst other technical issues, that it is an *experiment in cinematic communication of real events, without the help of inter-ti-*

ties, without the help of a story... and it ends its introductory call to viewers by assuming itself as an essay on the *creation of a truly international language*, based on its distancing from

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the *language of theatre or literature*. But although Vertov would claim a lack of storytelling in his film, he does not actually escape from the fact that *Man with the Movie Camera* creates not one, but an amalgam of small and apparently inconsequent but intertwined narratives, which jump cut from one to another. Even if not directly connected, such narratives — the woman sleeping and waking up, the divorce scene and the wedding scene, the depiction of a funeral or the birth of a child, the closed store and the moment of its opening with the awakening of the city — establish exquisite liaisons, while being themselves continuously cut through or absorbed by the filming of movement, a movement taken from or through several machines — cars, trams, lifts — always carefully shot and assembled by the film's most present character, the man with the movie camera. But all along, Vertov is, in fact, telling a story, the story of the film itself — which is, at the same time, the viewers' object of observation in the movie theatre —, the story of the filming of the scenes that make up the film those same viewers are watching, and the actual process of cutting, editing and assembling the film. *Man with the Movie Camera* thus stages the reality of the events it shoots, manipulates it and organizes it in a way as to enhance and emphasise the depth of its actions, but also the continuous or cyclical aspects of the everyday. Furthermore, by stress-

¹³ Ibid.

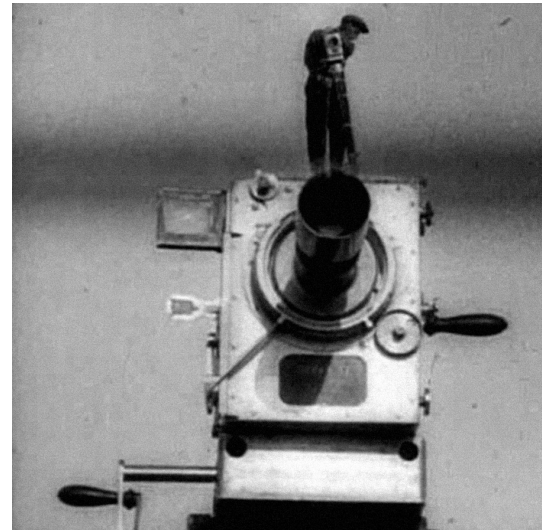
¹⁴ *Man with the Movie Camera*, written and directed by Dziga Vertov, produced by VUFKU, 68 mins., Soviet Union, 1929.



Helsinki, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy,
1930



Man with a Movie Camera, Dziga Vertov
(Vseukrainske Foto Kino Upravlinnia
[VUFKU], 1929)



ing the use of montage in such a radical way, Dziga Vertov also reveals the disruptive power of modernity, a power that embeds *the possibility of meaning produced by collision, by surprise, conflict and destruction*, as Solà-Morales puts it.¹⁵

*It induces a hallucination of the normal.*¹⁶

Through the lenses of both Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Dziga Vertov, reality becomes more of a subjective, almost surrealist, creation, in which *every image is to be seen as an object* — thus as reality — *and every object as an image* — thus as an appearance, *a hallucination that is also a fact*¹⁷. (...) *The fact that surrealist painting combines tricks of visual deception with meticulous attention to detail substantiates this.*¹⁸ Such a hallucination, understood as fact, only reveals the kind of *nature* in which the observer dwells. It is a phantom-like urban nature, whose structure mirrors the structure and aesthetics of the medium from which it becomes to really be apprehended, where the eye irrevocably inhabits the lens and dreamlike and uncanny fantasies either shape or embrace the *truthfulness* of its image. And so, if, as Siegfried Kracauer states, *reality is as we see it*¹⁹, photography and film become, in themselves, privileged environments within which the shape and aura of the *new* metropolis will come into existence.

In 2004, Chinese artist photographer Xing Danwen initiated a process of depicting China's contemporary urban landscapes through the composition of ambiguous but powerful images that juxtapose a representation of illusion — as a means of fulfilling and creating desire — with the creation of fictional dramas that turn into ironic glimpses of everyday life. Acknowledging how Chinese cities are evolving and changing into the generic post-modern, growing in newness, artifice, and similarity to western urban

imagery, the artist set out to photograph actual real estate models, into which *real* characters and situations are inserted, bringing forth the possibility of re-inventing the plain simulacra of the models as a truly corrupted, although sometimes tender, reality. The voidness of the real estate models, its eerie and surreal representations of a globalised and utterly aestheticised urban field are then transformed into a *real* context for sole human events, as if each of the *Urban Fictions* created by the artist could push the fakeness of these representations into the realm of *actual* reality. Furthermore, the exterior and heightened position of Xing Danwen's camera enhances the dreariness of each image while simultaneously evoking, in each of the superimposed actions, a feeling about humanity's ultimate urban experience. As a work statement, the artist declares that she was interested in starting from *a fake landscape to talk about its reality*.²⁰ This immediately establishes the conviction that a fictitious construction may actually lead to a clearer view onto what reality is or, rather, may represent. But Xing Danwen does not aim at just making *believable* or *critical* shots of architectural models to elicit a feeling of reality's mock-up contemporary condition — especially Chinese urban reality. By digitally manipulating the photographs of the real estate models through the invention of small human fictions, she actually incorporates reality — by incorporating herself enacting those fictions — into the fantasised and imaginary world presented by the real estate promoters, thus transforming the latency of the models into a sense of emptiness. The playfulness of the photomontages that Xing Danwen stages becomes a quite serious representation of the disconnections between desire and reality, a polarity which the models originally wish to present as perfectly attainable. The photographic fictions enacted and presented by Danwen effectively put the flow of fantasies of the contemporary city in a suspended state, one that pushes the

¹⁵ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, *Representaciones: de la Ciudad-Capital a la Metrópoli*, in op. Cit., p.66.

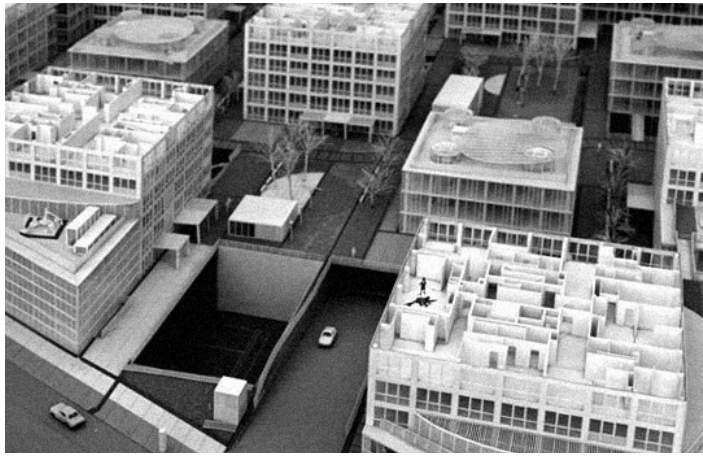
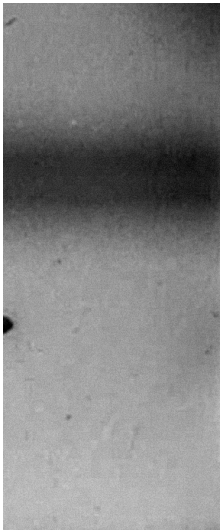
¹⁶ Rem Koolhaas, op. Cit., p.1250.

¹⁷ André Bazin, op. Cit., p. 9

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Introduction — 1. Photography, in Theory of Film, The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton University Press, 1997 (Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 8.

²⁰ Interview with Xing Danwen to talk about *Urban Fiction* by Britta Erickson, document downloaded from <http://www.danwen.com/web/press/article.html>, on 4 November 2010, 09:56.



Urban Fiction (image 0), Xing Danwen, 2004



Urban Fiction (image 0 — detail)

observer into their own urban reality and out of a dreamlike sequence of pursued desires. The images actually appear as mirages that critically juxtapose remains of utopian modernist beliefs and an almost apocalyptic sensation: the car accident and the woman who desperately cries for help in a strangely deserted urban road, the calm but dry presence of that serious woman talking on the phone in the only interior space showing any sign of life, the passionate sexual encounter which transforms the artificial landscape of the opened up models into unfinished real buildings — a very fitting evocation of the downfall of the world economies and the left-behind traces of their fabricated little paradises — or the hesitation of that woman on the balcony, staring fixedly towards the table set for one while stray cats roam the roofs of the shadowy buildings that extend infinitely. All of the images engulf both Herzog's desperation and Wender's optimistic pilgrimage through the debris of modernity. It is also quite easy to imagine Xing Danwen setting her camera, choosing the ideal point of view to create a new shot of this fictitious urban field, in much the same way as the *man with the movie camera*, who appears atop the city transforming it into a scale model, an image.

*Imagine a Hollywood movie about the Bible.
A city somewhere in the Holy Land.*²¹

Sometime in the near future, Theodore Twombly enacts his particular personal drama behind his apartment's modernistic wide windows, melancholic but still hopeful, either looking vaguely into the surrounding urban landscape, either sitting down turning his back to it — a city subliminally crafted from carefully selected fragments of both Los Angeles and Shanghai, an urban Frankenstein, only much more appealing and showing no signs of surgical sutures. In Spike Jonze's film *Her*²², the characters — all characters — walk, talk and exist alone,

in a city in which East and West do not hold any significant difference anymore, a city as generic as the one projected in the real estate models of Xing Danwen. Theodore's gaze — as that of Charlotte's from her Park Hyatt Tokyo hotel room in 2003 — reverses Danwen's gaze by setting the observer — as it does the characters — to confront with the exterior, the wider frame. If Xing Danwen's *Urban Fictions* drive us through reality as fake, Coppola's and Jonze's panoramas are fictions created to be taken as real. One cannot avoid but become entranced with such a vortex disguised in playful imagery. And in this playfulness, one suddenly realizes that reality is delightfully becoming more and more embedded in a strange psycho-imagery in which architecture stubbornly remains as a powerful but definitely surrealist icon that keeps aiming at our emotions, as if to fulfil, in each one of us, the promise of a Holy Land.

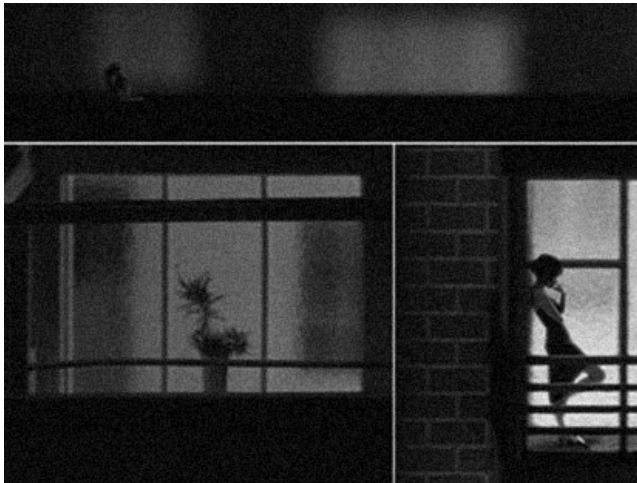
That is the story of the city and of the images it carries and projects upon us. The image is forever. We may never leave the theatre, after all...

²¹ Rem Koolhaas, op. Cit., p. 1264.

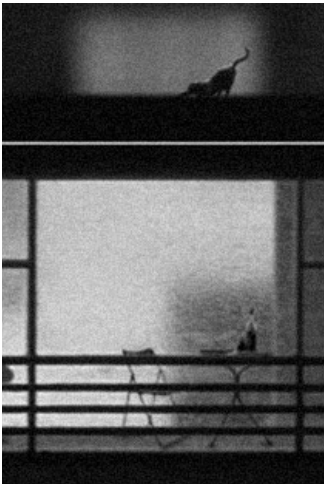
²² *Her*, Written and directed by Spike Jonze, produced by Annapurna Pictures, 126 mins., USA, 2013.



Urban Fiction (image 24),
Xing Danwen, 2004



Urban Fiction (image 24 — detail)



Her, Spike Jonze (Annapurna Pictures, 2013)